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ABSTRACT

This brief focuses on the role of fathers in contributing to children's well-being. The brief notes that collecting better data on fathers is vital to federal and state efforts to reform the welfare and child support systems and that understanding fathers' roles in their children's lives could help parents and social service providers better understand child development and meet children's needs in single-mother households. The brief reports findings contributing to the growing consensus among social scientists that fathers make unique contributions to their children's lives. Also cited is research suggesting that engaging fathers in the lives of their children, whether they can pay child support or not, has positive effects on the children and may motivate fathers to help support their children. Noting that information on fathers most likely to have a child on welfare is lacking, the brief describes three research efforts of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development: (1) finding "missing men," testing ways to identify individuals such as fathers with no fixed address who are often missed in Census counts; (2) understanding fragile families by locating fathers at hospitals in the hours after their child's delivery and tracking the father-child relationship during the child's early years; and (3) learning from the Early Head Start program, examining the impact of efforts to involve low-income fathers in the lives of their young children at Early Head Start sites. The brief also describes the work of the Fatherhood Initiative seeking to foster greater father involvement and to improve the collection of data on fathers. (KB)

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Improving Children's Well-Being: Understanding, Nurturing Fatherhood

When it comes to collecting data on families in the United States, father has often been the odd man out.

For generations, researchers have focused on mothers when they design and carry out studies, resulting in a lack of reliable information about the roles fathers play in their children's lives and within the family.

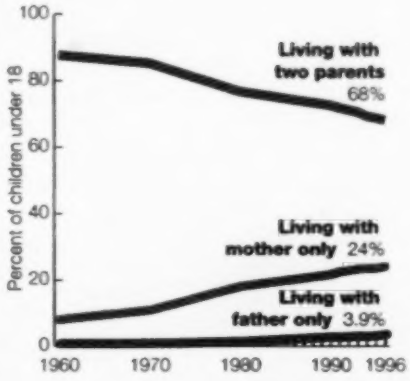
Collecting better data on fathers, and more generally on men, is more than just a question of equity. The information is vital to federal and state officials struggling to reform the welfare and child support systems. Understanding fathers' roles in their children's lives could also help parents and social service providers better understand child development and meet the needs of children in single-mother households.

Research Finds Fathers Do Make a Difference

Participants at national meetings on research on fatherhood, organized by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), agreed that the time has come to recognize that fathers contribute more than just a paycheck to family life. They explored a more comprehensive view of fatherhood that includes not just taking care of material needs but also caring for and spending time with children.

While researchers are still trying to identify exactly what fathers do that is distinctive, there is a growing consensus among social scientists that fathers do make unique contributions to their children's lives. Consider the following major findings:

Living Arrangements of U.S. Children Under 18 Years, 1960 to 1996



Sources: U.S Bureau of the Census, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements 1994," Current Population Reports, Series P20-484 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996); for 1996 data, Census Bureau Web site, http://www.census.gov.

- Researchers from Northwestern University and the University of Michigan reported that children of fathers who were involved in parent-teacher associations complete more years of schooling and have higher wages and family incomes as adults than children whose fathers were not involved in school activities.[1]
- Researchers from the Urban Institute reported that, contrary to popular opinion, most unmarrried fathers in their mid- to late-20s and early 30s maintain a close relationship with at least one of their children.[2]
- A team of researchers from Washington State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Brigham Young University reported that children in families headed by single mothers exhibit more behavioral problems and have lower math and reading abilities than children from married-couple families.[3]
- A University of Pennsylvania researcher who has studied urban families reported that when fathers are not present in their children's lives, their sons are more likely to become fathers themselves when they are teenagers and to live apart from their children.[4]
- A University of North Carolina researcher found that daughters whose fathers have warm, close relationships with them and spend time with them in shared activities were less likely to engage in early sexual activity.[5]

Implications for Reducing Poverty and Welfare

States have come to realize that welfare mothers are a diverse population. They are now discovering that fathers of children on welfare are diverse as well. Some 25 percent of these fathers are too poor to pay support. States are increasingly aware of this and have begun to extend job training and other benefits to these fathers to enable them to help support their children.

For the past 20 years, public policy has focused on collecting child support payments from absent fathers. Research supported by the NICHD suggests that engaging fathers in the lives of their children—whether they can pay child support or not—has positive effects on their children.

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The Federal Fatherhood Initiative

In June 1995, President Clinton directed every federal agency to review its programs and policies with an eye toward strengthening the role of fathers in families. He ordered agencies to "incorporate fathers, where appropriate, in government-initiated research regarding children and families."

The result is the Fatherhood Initiative, coordinated by the Domestic Policy Council of the White House and Vice President Al Gore's National Performance Review. The Initiative seeks to foster greater involvement of fathers in the lives of their children and to improve the collection of data on fathers.

At the federal level, the latter responsibility falls to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, an umbrella group of the major federal agencies responsible for gathering information on families and children. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development leads the forum's efforts to improve data collection on fathers. The forum sponsored a series of meetings on federal data gathering on fathers that brought together researchers and policymakers to identify what we know about male fertility, family formation, and fathering. The forum also discussed major problems in data collection and proposals for improving data gathering.

The results of these meetings are published in a report, *Nurturing Fatherhood: Improving Data and Research on Male Fertility, Family Formation and Fatherhood*, released in June 1998, which earned the vice president's Hammer Award for effective government.

A new study by a team of researchers found that receiving child support from non-custodial fathers had benefits for the children beyond the increased income, suggesting that involved fathers have a positive influence on child development.[6] When the impact of extra income was taken into account, the researchers still found evidence that a father's involvement in a child's life was linked to higher achievement test scores.

And greater involvement with their children may make fathers feel they have a greater stake in their children's lives, motivating them to help support their children. A study by a University of California researcher found that fathers with joint custody of their children were more likely to spend time with them and also more likely to make child support payments than fathers of children whose mothers had sole custody.[7]

Information on young fathers, low-income fathers, and "absent" fathers—those most likely to have a child on welfare—is limited. The NICHD is supporting three new research efforts to help policymakers better understand fathers of children who live in impoverished, single-parent households.

Finding the "missing men": The U.S. Census Bureau has refined and is testing ways to identify individuals who are often missed by census counts. Many of the undercounted are fathers with no fixed addresses—in any given month they may live for a few days or weeks in the households of a variety of relatives and friends.

Understanding "fragile families": A 20-city study of low-income, minority families is examining how fathers become involved with their babies even though most are unmarried and do not reside with their children. Researchers are having success locating fathers at hospitals in the hours after their child's delivery and tracking the father-child relationship during the child's early years.

Learning from the Early Head Start Program: Researchers are examining the impact of efforts to involve low-income fathers in the lives of their young children at federally funded Early Head Start Program sites across the country.

Together this new research aims to help policymakers and social service providers better understand relationships between low-income men and their children, identify and remove barriers to family formation, and determine which characteristics help low-income children in fragile families thrive.

For more information: The report, Nurturing Fatherhood: Improving Data and Research on Male Fertility, Family Formation and Fatherhood, *can be purchased for $19.95 from Child Trends, Inc., 4301 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20008; fax: 202/362-5533; Web site: http:www.childtrends.org.*

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Today's Issues is a series of briefing papers prepared by the Population Reference Bureau for the Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch, Center for Population Research, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), National Institutes of Health. For more information, call 301/496-1174.